Deus Vult: John L. O’Sullivan, Manifest Destiny, and American Democratic Messianism

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ABSTRACT
Within the rhetorical tradition of American civil religion, the United States is often depicted as divinely obligated to spread and defend democratic government throughout the world. That trope partly stems from the political thought of John L. O’Sullivan, editor of the United States Democratic Review and the christener of Manifest Destiny. This essay analyzes his political writing, which characterizes America as a sinless agent of God’s will, possessing a messianic destiny to initiate a global democratic transfiguration and redeem the world from tyranny. O’Sullivan’s millenarian thought identifies democracy with American power, framing politics as a conflict between democratic good and despotic evil. His vision of America as specially obligated and authorized to intervene in the affairs of other nations remains influential on American political speech and self-understanding today. Understanding O’Sullivan’s political theology helps explain elements of American political speech and behavior in the twenty-first century, especially in the international arena.

All this will be our future history, to establish on earth the moral dignity and salvation of man—the immutable truth and beneficence of God. (John L. O’Sullivan, “The Great Nation of Futurity”)

The idea that the United States has a particular and exceptional relationship with God is pervasive in American political speech and is an important part of the tradition of American civil religion. Americans tend to “think their own integrity and activity to be something special and of world historical importance. For an American, not to be who one is is then not only a failure of republican virtue; it is also a failure to meet a transhistorical standard” (Strong 1980, 35). Within the tradition of American civil religion, the standards to which

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the nation is held are backed by the weight of religious faith, and this faith is a matter of both collective and individual identity. Thus, the influence of American civil religion goes well beyond emotional appeal, structuring the American self-concept and affecting the behavior of political actors, providing what Robert Bellah terms “a transcendental goal for the political process” (1967/2005, 42; see also Gamoran 1990; Cristi 2001; and Gitlin and Leibovitz 2010). Consider, for example, President George W. Bush’s 2003 State of the Union address: in reference to the war in Iraq, he made the claim that “Americans are a free people, who know that freedom is the right of every person and the future of every nation. The liberty we prize is not America’s gift to the world, it is God’s gift to humanity” (2003). These ideas are, however, not unique to the second President Bush, who in this speech echoes Woodrow Wilson’s defense of the country’s entry into the First World War. Of American soldiers, Wilson said, “These men were crusaders. They were not going forth to prove the might of the United States. They were going forth to prove the might of justice and right, and all the world accepted them as crusaders, and their transcendent achievement has made all the world believe in America as it believes in no other nation organized in the modern world” (1919/2006, 419). Implicit in the words of these two presidents is a millennial vision in which the United States serves as an instrument of the divine will, bringing about an era of global political freedom in which existing regimes may be justly toppled in order to bring about the promised golden age of democracy.

This millenarian vision is importantly shaped by the thought of John L. O’Sullivan, editor, literary critic, and the man who coined the label “Manifest Destiny” for the belief that God had revealed that it was his will for the United States to spread across all of North America (Pratt 1927, 1933). O’Sullivan is commonly cited in examinations of the history and enduring romance of Manifest Destiny, but his own body of work and the intellectual framework within which Manifest Destiny is embedded have been underexamined. His work, especially in his “poliço-literary” journal, the United States Democratic Review, was widely read within the Democracy (as the Democratic Party was then often called) from the late 1830s through the 1840s, after which O’Sullivan continued to be active in the Van Buren and Pierce administrations before fading into obscurity after the Civil War.¹

¹ O’Sullivan described himself as a literary nationalist, and due to his pursuit of a uniquely American literature he was at the forefront of the Young America movement and providing a launching point for the careers of Walt Whitman and Nathaniel Hawthorne, the latter of whom shared with O’Sullivan a long friendship (Widmer 1999). It is from Hawthorne’s correspondence that some of the more colorful details of O’Sullivan’s life emerge, such as that in 1838 Hawthorne had nearly challenged O’Sullivan to a duel over the affections of one Mary
O'Sullivan conceived of the United States as being effectively the hand of God. The unique religious mission and special moral status O'Sullivan attributes to the United States distinguishes his thinking on Manifest Destiny from Thomas Jefferson's purely political concept of the "Empire of Liberty," from which it is in many ways descended. O'Sullivan's vision was very much a fighting faith, a kind of "militant, quasi-secular religiosity," and he saw himself as the heir of the American Revolution, which he describes as "unconsummated" and thus ongoing (Widmer 1999, 40, 8).

O'Sullivan's religious understanding of the American mission draws on an established tradition of American providential thinking. The same sense of world-historical and transformative significance was common among the Puritans, who believed that their settlements in North America would transform not only that continent but Europe as well (Miller 1953; Guyatt 2007, 178). Even after the collapse of Puritan intellectual hegemony, this self-concept and sense of mission remained. George Bancroft's 1834 History of the United States (published only 3 years before the first issue of the Democratic Review) described providence as being at work in American history, which for Bancroft was evidence of the political and moral progress occurring across the world by providential design. O'Sullivan's thought grows out of these traditions, to which he

Crowninsheld Silsbee, daughter of Senator Nathan Silsbee (Hawthorne 1838/1984). The friendship between the two men resumed, and they assisted each other in maneuvering for patronage appointments across the years (Hawthorne 1845/1984, 1857/1984).

2. Like O'Sullivan, Jefferson envisioned the spread of republican government across North America and was willing to countenance violence against other groups, including Native Americans, blacks, and Spaniards, to achieve it (Murrin 2000). Nonetheless, Jefferson stops well short of O'Sullivan's claim that the divine mission of the United States exempted it from the ethical standards that bound other nations, nor did he have O'Sullivan's strong emphasis on American national mission and identity, being willing to countenance the idea that the empire of liberty need not be politically united. He said as much in an 1804 letter to his friend Joseph Priestly, writing, "I look to this duplication of area for the extending a government so free and economical as ours, as a great achievement to the mass of happiness which is to ensue. Whether we remain in one confederacy, or form into Atlantic and Mississippi confederacies, I believe not very important to the happiness of either part. Those of the western confederacy will be as much our children and descendents as those of the eastern" (Jefferson 1804/1905, 71).

3. Mark A. Noll argues that Jonathan Edwards and the First Great Awakening brought an end to Puritan intellectual hegemony in the first half of the eighteenth century, opening "thought to a subtle, yet powerful, move from theology to politics, and intellectual leadership to a shift from the clergy to men of state." As intellectual hegemony and the generation of collective self-understanding moved from the sphere of religion to that of politics, "religious values migrated along with religious terms into the political speech and so changed political values" (Noll 2002, 50, 85).

4. Bancroft's thought has much in common with O'Sullivan's. Like O'Sullivan, Bancroft saw the territorial expansion of the United States as a providentially mandated expansion of the sphere of liberty. Unlike O'Sullivan, however, he saw the United States as being only the
contributes a strong sense of the political apocalyptic and a robust defense of America’s special moral status.

Despite the importance of Manifest Destiny as a concept, O’Sullivan’s civil religious language and the political theology within which Manifest Destiny was embedded have not received due treatment.5 Considerations of American civil religion in the nineteenth century tend to focus their attentions on Abraham Lincoln, whom Bellah describes in his seminal article as representing “civil religion at its best,” saying that Lincoln “not only formulated but in his own person embodied its meaning for Americans” (1967/2005, 9–10). Lincoln and O’Sullivan represent competing approaches within the tradition of American civil religion. Lincoln represents a strand of civil religious thought that conceives of the United States as being obligated to pursue self-perfection, so that it might become a democratic exemplar to other nations. This emphasis on national self-perfection lends itself to a particular sensitivity to civil religious sin within the nation. The strand of thought of which O’Sullivan is part, by contrast, locates sin exclusively outside the borders of the United States and understands America as a purely virtuous entity obligated to work as a missionary of democracy throughout the world.

While O’Sullivan’s thought and political impact have been examined elsewhere, I provide a fuller and more thorough engagement with the civil religious aspects of O’Sullivan’s thought than have previous scholars.6 In doing so, I for

5. Carl Schmitt famously argues that “all significant concepts of the modern history of the state are secularized theological concepts not only because of their historical development—in which they were transferred from theology to the theory of the state, whereby, for example, the omnipotent God became the omnipotent lawgiver—but also because of their systematic structure, the recognition of which is necessary for a sociological consideration of these concepts” (2005, 36). While this is certainly true of O’Sullivan’s thought, he goes yet further, explicitly fusing liberal democratic politics with the force of religious zeal.

6. The most informative source on O’Sullivan’s life and thought is Robert D. Sampson’s (2003) largely sympathetic biography. Pratt (1927, 1933) attributes to O’Sullivan the term Manifest Destiny and is probably the reason that he is remembered at all in scholarly discourse. O’Sullivan is most often written about in works on either the Young America movement or Manifest Destiny. In writing on the former, useful information on O’Sullivan and the Democratic Review can be found in Curti (1926), Widmer (1999), and Eyal (2007). In scholarship on Manifest Destiny, Merk (1970) is classic and contains a good deal of information about O’Sullivan, as do Weinberg (1935/1963) and Wilentz (2005). Other useful histories of Manifest Destiny that include O’Sullivan and the Democratic Review are more concerned with the justice of Manifest Destiny and, thus, harsher in tone. Among these are Hietala (1985) and Stephanson (1995).
the first time draw out and make explicit the theological system implicit therein, demonstrating the conceptual linkages between his arguments on expansion, white supremacy, slavery, and foreign affairs. Within the framework of O’Sullivan’s political theology, the United States is depicted as the direct agent of God’s will on earth. Moreover, it is also unique among nations in that it is without sin. That said, America’s sinlessness does not equate to its perfection. Indeed, O’Sullivan (particularly in the earlier phases of his public career) was devoted to a number of political and social reforms, including the abolition of the death penalty and agitation for workers’ rights. His activism obviously implies that he saw issues in American politics and society that he felt needed to be changed. How then to understand his rhetoric of a sinless nation? The answer is that, in the terms of O’Sullivan’s political theology, that which is sinful is that which violates the “high and holy” democratic principle. In this way a policy, such as the death penalty, may be wrong, but within the framework of O’Sullivan’s political theology it is not a sin because it does not violate the democratic principle. Thus, morality and religious purity are to a great extent decoupled, except on the crucial point of the democratic principle. The political entity that is America need not be practically perfect to be spiritually unstained, and it is this religious purity that for O’Sullivan legitimates America’s exceptional status on the world stage.7 Taken together with his rejection of the doctrine of original sin (elaborated below in sec. 1), this means that the United States is born sinless due to its radical break with world history, and it remains so by virtue of its providential mission. Thus, while America may not be without flaw, it is for O’Sullivan emphatically without sin. In his thought, America’s sinlessness and divine mission in world history exempt it from the legal and moral norms that bind other nations, and there exist no legitimate constraints on its providential mission to expand the global reach of liberty.

O’Sullivan’s theology views democracy as more than simply a set of governing institutions; it is also a faith. That is to say, the democratic faith need not only be institutionalized; it must be held. To hold a faith is to actively embrace it, not merely to abide by its strictures but to will it in a particular way. The faith-based understanding of democracy marks O’Sullivan’s thought as being

7. The centrality of Manifest Destiny to the development of the trope of American exceptionalism is well established. For example, in the broad discussion of American exceptionalism in *American Political Thought*’s first issue, both Peter S. Onuf (2012) and Hilde Eliassen Restad (2012) ably locate Manifest Destiny in its historical and political context. In the same issue, Patrick J. Deneen and James W. Ceaser single out O’Sullivan for consideration. Deneen (2012) correctly notes the Hamiltonian echoes in O’Sullivan’s assertions of America’s radical newness, while Ceaser (2012) emphasizes O’Sullivan’s religious heterodoxy and draws out the Hegelian synthesis of religion and philosophy present in much nineteenth-century expansionist thought.
thoroughly religious (in addition to being political) in a way that has not been adequately recognized. Conceiving of democracy as a faith to be held, O’Sullivan is able to exclude from it persons who are nominally within the geographic boundaries of the United States but who remain “unbelievers,” specifically, African slaves, Native Americans, and Mexicans. The importance of this aspect of O’Sullivan’s civil religious framework is difficult to overstate: being unable to hold the faith, these groups can legitimately be coerced and governed without their consent. Unable to embrace the democratic principle, they are neither regarded as democratic equals nor entitled to democratic government.

This novel political theology was developed primarily in the context of O’Sullivan’s journal and his activism within the Democracy, of which he was a loyal member. He supported the party’s expansionist, (white) egalitarian, and free-trade-oriented radical wing, known as the Locofocos, and he was affiliated with the Young America movement. Party loyalty and enthusiasm defined O’Sullivan’s personal and private life, leading him, on the one hand, to remain loyal to Van Buren in the face of numerous disappointments and, on the other, to engage in a number of failed business schemes and, later in life, to embrace spiritualism and the dubious science of “animal magnetism” (Sampson 2003, 106–7). Even so, for a time in the mid-nineteenth century, his energetic, idealistic political writing shaped the agenda of the Democratic Party at a national level, committing it to a program of states’ rights, free trade, and expansion.

In section 1 of this article, I consider O’Sullivan’s understanding of the democratic principle and how it relates to the United States as a national faith. From there, I move in section 2 to a consideration of the ways that O’Sullivan’s description of this relationship structures his understanding of different kinds of sacralized space and time that exist on either side of America’s borders. In section 3, I explore the ways in which O’Sullivan’s belief about who could and, importantly, could not embrace the democratic principle both motivated his expansionist agenda and legitimated the coercion of

8. Born at sea in November 1813, John L. O’Sullivan’s family environment was saturated with romantic drama. His father, also named John, had studied for the priesthood before abandoning the seminary for a life as a sea captain with a probable sideline in piracy. His mother, née Mary Rowly, had once been pronounced dead of fever and physically lowered into her grave when her husband noticed signs of life. John senior drowned off the coast of South America in 1825, when his ship foundered and he attempted in vain to swim ashore with a rope in order to rescue the ship’s passengers, a romantic gesture that left an impression on his young son. Mary lodged a lawsuit against the federal government for goods seized on suspicion of piracy from her husband’s ship before his death. In 1836, the family was reimbursed to the tune of $20,210, a move personally approved by President Andrew Jackson, likely at the urging of Martin Van Buren, which could explain O’Sullivan’s staunch loyalty to the latter across the whole of both of their political careers (Sampson 2003, 2–7).
Native Americans and people of African descent. In section 4, I argue that the expansionist project is for O’Sullivan the redemption of the world from the evils of tyranny by a sinless and messianic United States. Finally, in the conclusion (sec. 5), I present the ways that an understanding of O’Sullivan’s political theology can aid us in thinking about contemporary American politics.

1. THE DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLE

O’Sullivan’s Democratic Review advances a dynamic vision of the American polity and its mission in world history, combining a romantic image of an epic struggle for liberation with the Enlightenment emphasis on political rights. Although this was not an idea new to American politics, Democrats such as O’Sullivan were the first to suggest that leading by moral example was not enough and that the United States should fulfill its destiny to democratize the world by any means necessary (Eyal 2007). The light of the city on a hill now had to be brought to other nations. The sense of American exceptionality in O’Sullivan’s writing is robust, even as he advocates for a universal set of political ideals: in the introduction to the first issue of the Democratic Review, which O’Sullivan describes as a “full and free profession of the cardinal principles of political faith on which we take our stand,” the advent of the United States is depicted as a discontinuous break from the whole of human history (O’Sullivan 1837, 2). “All history has to be re-written; political science and the whole scope of all moral truth have to be considered and illustrated in the light of the democratic principle. All old subjects of thought and all new questions arising, connected more or less directly with human existence, have to be taken up again and re-examined in this point of view” (14). For O’Sullivan, then, the birth of the United States, which has the democratic principle as the “fundamental element of [its] new social and political system,” is an event on par with the birth of Christ, not only marking a new era of human history but actually forcing the reevaluation and reconceptualization of everything that has come before. O’Sullivan describes the democratic principle (a term that he uses interchangeably with the voluntary principle) as being “the best government is that which governs least,” or, more poetically, “Let man be fettered by no duty, save / His brother’s right—like his, inviolable” (6, 7).

Two things about O’Sullivan’s “high and holy” democratic principle, on which his political theology hinges, are important to note. First, the United States, which embodies it, is identified with democracy, which in turn “is the cause of Humanity” (O’Sullivan 1837, 11). In this way, the American interest is by definition identical to the universal human interest. Second, O’Sullivan argues that to oppose this view of American destiny or the Democratic agenda with which it is identified (as he explicitly describes the Whigs doing) is to
demonstrate ignorance, madness, or moral failure (1–2). The reason for this is that the embrace of a broader need for government is to impute “a radical deficiency in the moral elements implanted by its Creator in human society, that no other alternative can be devised,” and indeed it is “scarcely consistent with a true and living faith in the existence and attributes of that Creator, so to believe; and such is not the democratic belief” (5). Thus, the political opponents of the Democrats, at least as envisioned by O’Sullivan, act in bad faith to the point that they renounce their creator.

Thus, O’Sullivan’s political theology breaks from orthodox Christian belief by rejecting the Augustinian doctrine of original sin: he contends both that human beings are born without “a radical deficiency in the moral elements implanted by its Creator in human society” and that to believe otherwise is incompatible with a “true and living faith” in the creator. Further, he asserts the moral priority of the democratic principle over the revealed religion of Christianity. Although the democratic principle embodied by America is “essentially involved in Christianity,” it is this principle that marks Christianity as being of divine origin rather than the reverse, as it is the “pervading democratic equality among men” that is Christianity’s “highest fact, and one of its most radiant internal evidences of the divinity of its origin” (O’Sullivan 1837, 7). In Democratic Review, volume 1, O’Sullivan signals that a belief in the God of America, who is the God of democracy and thus of all humanity, needs not necessarily refer to anything outside of American political thought and history; he moves to access religious fervor without the constraints of orthodoxy.9

Despite the Christian tropes and form of O’Sullivan’s civil religious framework, its concern with republican virtue and the general will lend it a Rousseauian quality. For O’Sullivan, however, the general will is not that of the united American republics but rather that of all mankind. The United States forms the vanguard and the bringer of universal democracy, a minority that “embodies the general will, and is the only place where this is embodied” (Taylor 2007, 206).10 In turn, this special status as divine agent and vanguard of universal futurity effects what Kierkegaard calls the teleological suspension of the ethical, exempting America from the ethical and legal standards that bind other nations, something that would become strongly apparent as O’Sullivan argued in favor of American expansion to the west. For him,

9. Although O’Sullivan was baptized an Episcopalian, and later converted to his ancestral Catholicism, this fits with his lifelong skepticism toward organized religion (Widmer 1999).

10. Taylor (2007, 206) goes on to say that such “is part of the theory of Revolution; it has no place in the theory of government.” O’Sullivan’s vision of the American polity was one in which the Revolution continued indefinitely.
the moral and religious claims of the democratic principle trump all other ethical concerns.

2. LIBERTY, TIME, AND AMERICAN TELOS

For O’Sullivan, the faith-based nature of the democratic principle grounds and structures the whole of American government on the principle of liberty. This belief frames both his somewhat anemic opposition to slavery and his more vigorous support of states’ rights. The democratic principle also determines the boundaries of the American polity in two ways. The first is geographic, as the expansion of the United States westward is identical to the expansion of the democratic principle. The second is political, as the alleged inability of some groups to hold the democratic principle as a faith serves to exclude certain racial and ethnic groups from O’Sullivan’s vision of the American political community.

Although personally vaguely committed to the gradual end of slavery, O’Sullivan wanted the debate on the subject to be excluded from the political sphere altogether. The Democrats were strongly in favor of preserving slavery in its extant form, but the sentiment in favor of its expansion was not quite so reliable, and party voices like O’Sullivan had to navigate this tension (McPherson 1988; Howe 2007). In 1844, O’Sullivan published in the Democratic Review a long letter by Senator Robert J. Walker of Mississippi, a defender of slavery whose perspective on the question matches O’Sullivan’s. Walker describes slavery as “not a political” problem “but a moral and economical one, the decision of which must rest, voluntarily, with the slave states themselves” (1844, 429). For O’Sullivan, slavery was a question of intrastate commerce, not of rights, and the American polity was a community of belief formed by equal and sovereign states, each of which retained its sovereignty. That the legal status of individuals, even to the point of enslavement, is for him a matter of state commerce is reflective of O’Sullivan’s belief that America was composed not of individuals but of independent states bound together for the advancement of a shared belief in democratic government, not to surrender their own liberties and self-determination (O’Sullivan 1844; Merk 1970). Given that slavery was recognized in the Constitution, which bound the states under a single government, he believed it illegitimate to compel a change to the status quo, which would (ironically) violate the spirit of the democratic principle.

O’Sullivan’s resistance to abolitionism on the grounds that the right of a state to allow slavery is included in the Constitution highlights the complex role of time within his civil religious framework. Like Andrew Jackson before him, O’Sullivan viewed the Union as perfect at its birth, making it necessary for the nation to return eternally to the unchanging designs of the founders, scraping away the corrupting accretions of time and preserving the nation’s
religious purity (Wilson 1974). This underscores the extent to which O’Sullivan depicts the political as being also the religious: although he was a firm supporter of economic, industrial, and social progress, for him American politics must always be brought back to the time of origin. In this way, although the profane history of technological and industrial progress may be linear, the sacred political history of American government is circular.  

That being said, there is also present a sacralized vision of linear time, as there is in Christianity (Eliade 1959): both the founding of the United States (a divine intervention in historical time) and the democratic transfiguration of the globe take place within linear history. For those within the American polity, sacred time is circular, as they act to preserve the perfect liberty achieved in the Constitution, but as America spreads the democratic principle to the world beyond its present borders, it sacralizes linear time, as history is understood to be America’s progressive redemption of the world from tyranny. The relationship between these two forms of sacred time is complex and rests on O’Sullivan’s belief in the sinlessness of the American polity, on the one hand, and on the corruption of the world beyond its borders, on the other. Thus, the preservation of American purity by an eternal return to the founding is an attempt to combat the corroding effects of time’s passage, in effect preserving the moment of the founding as an unending present. Nonetheless, the world outside the borders of the United States is in need of conversion to its political faith, and for this change to occur, it is necessary that the relationship between the United States and the outside world be understood in terms of linear time. The teleological endpoint of this linear time, which is to say the end of history itself, is a democratic millennium with the United States in the role of the messiah. J. G. A. Pocock says of this impulse that, if as Locke says in the beginning all the world was America, then “if in the end all the world should be America again, the mission of a chosen people would have been fulfilled” (1975, 542). Thus, within O’Sullivan’s logic, and that of Manifest Destiny more broadly understood, American expansion is understood to be a matter of domestic politics rather than international affairs (Restad 2012, 65).

11. Mircea Eliade describes this contrast between linear profane time and circular sacred time, which is “always the same” and “composed of an eternal present, which is infinitely recoverable,” as the essential quality of religious thought (1959, 70, 88). It is interesting to note that for O’Sullivan, this circularity would ideally be reduced to a kind of eternal revolutionary moment, as the nation lived out the tenets set forth at its founding in perfect fidelity. Taken together with O’Sullivan’s belief in the ongoing and “unconsummated” nature of the Revolution, this supports Major Wilson’s (1974) claim that the Democrats tended to be interested in the quantitative expansion of American society through space, while the Whigs were concerned with its qualitative development across time.
In O’Sullivan’s telling, American history, guided by the hand of God, has prepared the American people to redeem the world, bringing the historical process to its culmination in a democratic apocalypse, followed by a “millennium” in which peace and freedom endure across the globe. This apocalyptic concern imbues American politics with the force and legitimacy of religion.¹² Pocock says of the political function of apocalypse that “prophecy and eschatology formed a device for drawing the process of salvation more fully within the world of time, and so subjecting its outward organization to temporal authority; history (and especially sacred history) was the instrument of secular power” (1973, 179). In this way, O’Sullivan’s investment of American politics with religious force serves to draw what are essentially religious questions (of the redemption of the world from evil and of the ultimate purpose of history) into the sphere of the political. For him, the functions of the church have been subsumed within the authority of the state, and religion is folded into politics.

As is evident in the democratic principle, O’Sullivan believes that the telos of politics, and thus of history, is human liberation. Liberty is for him the primary political good, being both the will of God and the universal human interest. Despite occasional rhetorical claims to the contrary, for him equality is a second-order political virtue in that its value derives from its role in leveling hierarchies, which makes human freedom possible. O’Sullivan’s commitment to equality, based as it is in the practice of political and economic freedom, is limited by the ability of individuals to claim the right to self-rule. According to O’Sullivan, some groups possess this ability and others do not. Regarding the individual’s practice of freedom, he wrote, “According to their knowledge of, and respect for, the rights of a citizen, shall their freedom from governmental restraints be measured out to them, and every privilege which they learn to exercise wisely, government will be forced to relinquish, until each man becomes a law unto himself” (1845b, 245). Thus, individuals are to be politically free only insofar as they are believed to be capable of self-legislation.

For O’Sullivan this is true on a global scale, not only within American borders. This is evidenced by his enthusiastic attitude toward westward expansion and his equally enthusiastic support for the European democratic

¹². Nicholas Guyatt identifies three types of providential thought in American politics: judicial, in which providence acts on behalf of the deserving without any grand plan for humanity; historical, which describes certain nations and peoples as having been destined to accomplish divinely ordained mission; and apocalyptic, which is the belief that God is working out the events of the Book of Revelation in contemporary history. Although Guyatt sensibly locates the broad current of Manifest Destiny within the category of historical providentialism, O’Sullivan’s thought in particular merges the historical and apocalyptic types: although there is little reference to the Bible, it is nonetheless strongly and recognizably apocalyptic (Guyatt 2007, 6, 224).
radicals of 1848. This enthusiasm extended even to the point of calling for military intervention in support of all who fought for what O’Sullivan called (using the same words that he used to describe American democracy) the “high and holy cause” of democracy in Europe as part of the American world-historical mission (O’Sullivan 1841b, 276; see also Eyal 2007). This legitimate ability of groups outside of the American continent to invoke the American state’s capacity for violence on their own behalf indicates that for O’Sullivan the identification of American interests with those of humanity at large works both ways, as he argues that the mere presence of democratic struggle by itself should prove decisive for American politics in the international arena. O’Sullivan’s attitude is millenarian, seeing the American mission to remake the world in its own image in apocalyptic terms in which the end goal is the complete and permanent transfiguration of politics on a global level (Wilentz 2005).

3. RACIAL HOMOGENEITY, POLITICAL FAITH, AND EXPANSION

Despite his belief in this global mission, O’Sullivan, like Andrew Jackson, did not believe all groups to be capable of credibly embracing the democratic principle. It is for this reason that he opposed the annexation of Mexico to the United States, which had been advocated among the more enthusiastic of the Democratic politicians associated with Young America. To O’Sullivan, Mexicans were “semi-barbarous” and “substantially below our national average in both purity and intelligence.” The consequence of this is that

13. Implicit in much of O’Sullivan’s writing is the sense that democracy and American rule are essentially identical, such that where there is one there must also be the other. This implication was sometimes made explicit by Democratic politicians such as Representative Felix McConnell of Alabama, who in 1846 called for the annexation of Ireland, which, like Mexico, Oregon, the Yucatan, and Texas was a downtrodden area that should feel lucky to reap the blessings of liberty under American government (Eyal 2007, 97).

14. O’Sullivan’s suspicions of the Mexican War cost him the editorship of the New York Daily News in 1845, and he sold the Democratic Review soon after (Sampson 2003, 206–7). Widmer (1999) argues that there exist two distinct periods of the Young America movement, with an idealistic, egalitarian Young America I existing in the 1830s and 1840s and a belligerent, racist Young America II present in the 1850s. Given the way that what he calls Young America II seems to my mind to be a more or less natural evolution of the arguments and tropes presented by Young America I, and the fact that there were many individuals, including O’Sullivan, associated with both eras, I have not preserved this differentiation.

15. The extent to which O’Sullivan was at this point precisely what one might call a racist is a subject of some debate. Given the absolute supremacy of Western European culture that he posits, scholars such as Thomas Hietala have felt comfortable depicting him as such (Hietala 1985, 255–57). Some, including Edward L. Widmer, have pointed out that
“to enfranchise them, therefore, and give their representatives a voice in our legislature, would doubtless have the double effect of producing anarchy within their own borders, and of embarrassing our own interests to a most disastrous extent.” Indeed, it could take as long as a century of education through the intercourse of free trade, the agents of which he describes as “missionaries of our political science,” before Mexicans could be admitted to the Union (O’Sullivan 1845b, 243–48). O’Sullivan’s concern was that the forcible annexation of Mexico would contaminate the United States, either causing chaos in American politics or causing Americans to make a mockery of their own democratic principles by ruling Mexico tyrannically.

Thus, individuals are to be politically free only insofar as they are capable of self-legislation, which means that the democratic principle does not apply equally to all groups and individuals. Although all men may have been created equal, they do not have an equal right to self-government. Equality depends here on the ability to be free, and so it is for O’Sullivan something to be decided within the sphere of politics, with some being more equal than others. This may explain the rather callous attitudes toward slavery and the treatment of indigenous populations across the course of O’Sullivan’s career. This is borne out in his 1841 Report in Favor of the Abolition of the Punishment of Death by Law.16 There, he describes the laws of the Mosaic code as being in the “barbarian spirit of revenge,” saying that the Israelites’ barbarism and inherent wickedness, which made a system of draconian punishments necessary, had been instilled in them by their mistreatment as slaves, which in turn rendered them unfit for a more refined system of government (O’Sullivan 1841a, 9–12). Slavery, for O’Sullivan, rendered slaves permanently incapable of self-legislation, and thus they could never be free. Indeed, the injunctions of Levitical law “were addressed to people but a few removes from the condition of savages, and almost universally addicted to the most heinous acts of wickedness” (13). This disregard for the capacity of “savages” for self-rule is suggestive, as O’Sullivan understood the native peoples of the United States to be even more unfit for democratic

O’Sullivan explicitly wrote against attributing inherent inferiority to racial groups and was careful to advocate only the superiority of European thought, culture, and politics (Widmer 1999, 51). Interestingly, this species of white supremacy was much more typical of the Whigs than of the Democrats, who typically saw it as being a matter of inherent difference between races (Howe 1984). Given the nigh-perfect correlation between the two, however, I am not convinced that there would be any meaningful difference either way in whether an individual such as O’Sullivan should be considered a racist.

16. O’Sullivan’s dedication to the end of capital punishment was sincere, and he spent a significant portion of his time in the New York legislature in an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to bring it about. His primary opponents in this struggle were Protestant clergymen.
government than he did the Mexicans, and indeed in this way he was able to excise them entirely from political consideration.

The most robust solution to the slavery question present in O’Sullivan’s antebellum writing is his promotion of the theory that slaves would be beneficially dispersed throughout the newly annexed Texas, homogenizing the existing slave states by granting whites a relatively greater share of their populations. Given this, it seems reasonable to suspect that his relative silence on the issue may not have been solely due to its political volatility. Rather, he may not have known how to deal with it within his political theology: although slavery made a mockery of the democratic principle, he believed that the slave, like the Native American, could not be integrated into the American polity because his capacity for self-legislation was underdeveloped.

Although O’Sullivan’s development of the democratic principle excludes slaves and Native Americans from the American polity, combined with what he believed was America’s exceptional moral status, it also forms the rhetorical basis of his case supporting American territorial expansion. He viewed the annexation of Texas, which he enthusiastically supported, as the model case for expansion westward (Hietala 1985). It is paradigmatic for two reasons: first, unlike the conquest of Mexico, it was from O’Sullivan’s perspective noncoercive. For him, the story of Texas was that a mass of plucky settlers had migrated West, revolted against the corrupt, aristocratic Mexican government, and set up an independent republic that was able to petition as a peer for entry into the Union. In an editorial in the October 13, 1845, edition of his short-lived newspaper the New York Morning News, O’Sullivan argues that it would have been self-contradictory for the United States to force annexation on Texas and thus violate the democratic principle that it itself embodied, and he argued even further that it would be selfish for the United States to withhold the blessings of liberty from the world by not expanding (Merk 1970).

Second, Texas was an ideal instance of annexation because that band of plucky settlers was more or less culturally and racially homogenous (this despite the fact that Texas was inhabited by a diverse population including peoples of African, European, Mexican, and Native American descent). O’Sullivan believed this homogeneity to be an advantage that would allow the empire of the United States to exist for a longer period than any previous empire (O’Sullivan 1845a). Texas could in fact help to increase the homogeneity even of slave states, as slave populations would be diffused throughout the vastness of the new state (Hietala 1985). The United States could thus simultaneously extend westward without the use of coercion, while at the same time reaffirming its uniform commitment to the democratic principle and retaining its spiritual purity as it grew.
Interestingly, this point of view in some ways runs counter to that of the era’s Democrats. As has been shown, O’Sullivan relies heavily on a collective and teleological concept of the American mission, which in turn often leads him to imagine the American populace as being in important ways more culturally homogenous than did other Democratic figures of his time. From the time of the Revolution onward, the fullness of the continent beckoned for expansion, but Americans were of two minds on the subject. Democrats, for the most part, tended to see expansion in terms broadly similar to those O’Sullivan lays out, while Whigs tended to see a value in preserving set limits for the new nation’s boundaries, prizing homogeneity and perceiving a positive good in a manageable size. However, Democratic party orthodoxy, held by O’Sullivan’s patron Van Buren among others, was to avoid emphasis on corporate, teleological goals. In order to displace the more homogenous Whigs, the Democrats needed to mobilize a diverse electoral coalition, including among others Southerners, Catholics, urban labor, and European immigrants. This electoral necessity made it important for them to highlight their opposition to incorporating minorities into a single way of thought or belief (Wilson 1974). Although committed to states’ rights and the freedom of conscience, O’Sullivan did not understand the United States as being composed of a diverse array of regional and immigrant cultures, as his fellow Democrats did. Instead, he conceived of the American people as sharing a single faith in the democratic principle and a common world-historical project to spread democracy across the globe, constituting a cultural homogeneity similar to that valued by the Whigs.

4. AMERICAN SINLESSNESS AND THE REDEMPTION OF THE WORLD

As seen in the previous section, for O’Sullivan, all values, including equality, are secondary to liberty in American politics. He contrasts the punitive Mosaic law with the redemptive faith of Christ, who rather than directly attacking despotic institutions, “sowed the seeds” that would “wipe them from the face of the earth” in a “great tide of republican reform” that began with the establishment of the United States (O’Sullivan 1841a, 21–22). O’Sullivan viewed democracy as similar to Christianity; it is a faith that must be actively held, and in being held, it transfigures the individual into one fit for self-government. To hold the democratic principle bestows equality with those who can grasp it, while granting superiority, moral and otherwise, over those who cannot or will not. At the same time, the communion of believers engenders a transfiguration of the American polity itself into a community of belief with an unsullied religious standing of its own (Hietala 1985).
O’Sullivan’s belief in American sinlessness is a direct consequence of his understanding of the American relationship to history described in the introduction to the first issue of the Democratic Review in which he directly rejected the Augustinian doctrine of original sin. Two years later, he writes, “we have, in reality, but little connection with the past history of any [other nations], and still less with antiquity, its glories, or its crimes. On the contrary, our national birth was the beginning of a new history” (O’Sullivan 1839, 426). This radical break from world history makes inevitable a bright new era in human endeavor, one beyond the contaminating grip of historical guilt. O’Sullivan continues, “America is destined for better deeds. It is our unparalleled glory that we have no reminisces of battle fields, but in defence of humanity, of the oppressed of all nations, of the rights of personal conscience, the rights of personal enfranchisement.” He then describes American destiny in the terms of religious revelation:

We have no interest in the scenes of antiquity, only as lessons of avoidance of nearly all their examples. The expansive future is our arena, and for our history. We are entering on its untrodden space, with the truths of God in our minds, beneficent objects in our hearts, and with a clear conscience unsullied by the past. We are the nation of human progress, and who will, what can, set limits to our onward march? Providence is with us, and no earthly power can. We point to the everlasting truth on the first page of our national declaration, and we proclaim to the millions of other lands, that “the gates of hell—the powers of aristocracy and monarchy—” shall not prevail against it. (427)\textsuperscript{17}

Here, the past is something not only to be broken from but to be repudiated in favor of an unreserved embrace of the new and the yet-to-be, which alone is unstained by the sin of tyranny. Relatedly, democratic government is here identified with the divine will, while the forces of aristocracy and monarchy, the governments of the past, are explicitly identified with the forces of evil. Further, O’Sullivan portrays providence as both blessing and motivating the continued success of the American nation. Indeed, the nation is characterized as the agent of God’s will, such that it is the primary embodiment thereof and the greatest opponent of his enemies. In this way, the forces of democracy are depicted as being inherently just and inevitably triumphant. The truths of America are eternal, and its enemies are the agents of satanic

\textsuperscript{17} Wilson notes that even when explicitly addressing the dimension of time, O’Sullivan thinks in spatial terms, as the “expansive” future is not a when but a where, an “untrodden space” (1974, 108). America, and thus liberty, expands in both time and space.
power. Because of this, Americans can act with consciences perfectly clear, knowing that they themselves are without moral stain and that their enemies are utterly corrupt, seeking to return the world to a pre-American era characterized primarily by darkness, tyranny, and spiritual evil.

The importance for O'Sullivan of America’s sinlessness, as well as its radical reordering of history and universal mission, becomes immediately apparent when he applies it to practical politics during America’s westward expansion. In late 1845, O'Sullivan boasted that “no lust for territory has stained our annals. No nation has been despoiled by us, no country laid desolate, no people overrun” (quoted in Hietala 1985, 193). One imagines that certain groups of indigenous peoples may have argued otherwise, but as described above, O'Sullivan in his civil religious framework neatly removes them from consideration. In the December 27, 1845, edition of the New York Morning News, O'Sullivan published an editorial that appears to have launched the phrase Manifest Destiny to national use (1845c).18 Regarding the legal disputes between the United States and Britain over the ownership of Oregon, O'Sullivan writes, “To state the truth at once in its neglected simplicity, we are free to say that were the respective arguments and cases of the two parties, as to all these points of history and law, reversed—had England all ours, and we nothing but hers—our claim to Oregon would still be best and strongest. And that claim is by the right of our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole of the continent which providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federated self-government entrusted to us” (1845c). Ultimately, these ideas boil down to two propositions: that the providential mission to spread democracy across the continent not only reinforces America’s legal claim to Oregon, but also it is by itself sufficient to trump any other possible legal claim to the territory, and, more generally, that a claim to moral right must take precedence over any legal one (Weinberg 1935/1963).

This approach to politics, both domestic and international, is characteristic of O'Sullivan (and of the Young America movement as a whole), and its rhetorical foundation rests on the identity of the United States with the divine mandate to democratize the world in accordance with the universal general will. Put another way, America does not have a mission, it is a mission, and the spread of American government is always the spread of human liberty and, thus, by definition, to the benefit of annexed populations.19 In this way,
it is for him legitimate to say that his homeland has never for a moment harbored a lust for conquest: America does not conquer, it liberates. This attitude is, again, directly linked to O’Sullivan’s view of America’s relationship to history and to God. Writing of the eventual global reach of democracy, he says,

All this will be our future history, to establish on earth the moral dignity and salvation of man—the immutable truth and beneficence of God. For this blessed mission to the nations of the world, which are shut out from the life-giving light of truth, has America been chosen; and her high example shall smite unto death the tyranny of kings, hierarchs, and oligarchs, and carry the glad tidings of peace and good will where myriads now endure an existence scarcely more enviable than that of beasts of the field. Who, then, can doubt that our country is destined to be the great nation of futurity? (O’Sullivan 1839, 430)

The only history of relevance to Americans, then, is future history. The relationships, institutions, and beliefs that for other nations flow forward from the past, for Americans, run back from the future, and it is not who they have been that is of importance, but rather it is who they will be that must shape their actions. America is here a combination of Israelites and Christ, as Americans become a chosen people who live under a system of government identical with “the immutable truth and beneficence of God” and through whom all the peoples of the world will be redeemed from darkness and bestiality. Thus, for Americans to refuse expansion is not only to betray their heavenly mandate but fundamentally to cease being Americans. In order to realize the “Great Nation of Futurity” latent within, America has to spread democracy westward and wherever else it is able, or else it violates its sacred mission.20

only merit to be exterminated” (Strong 1996, xxii). Within O’Sullivan’s civil religious framework, the enemies of democracy merit not only extermination but damnation, as they are enemies not only of man but of God.

20. O’Sullivan saw this mission as applying to Cuba as much as it did to Texas or Arizona, and the “liberation” of the island became something of an idée fixe for the rest of his politically active life, as the annexation of a territory held by the Spanish crown spoke to his democratic romanticism. Another reason was more material: he stood to benefit financially from expropriation of Spanish lands through his sister’s marriage. She married Cristobal Madan y Madan, a wealthy Cuban plantation owner and leader of the Havana Club, a group pushing for the overthrow of the Spanish and annexation by the United States (Sampson 2003). Finally, if annexed, Cuba would already be a slave state, adding strength to the Southern section with which the Democracy became more identified as the nineteenth century approached its midpoint (Merk 1970). The status of O’Sullivan’s efforts to provoke the annexation of Cuba provides a handy barometer of his political fortunes at the time: in 1848, he teamed with Senator Stephen Douglas to make an argument that strongly influenced Polk’s effort to acquire the island by

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Ironically, for all his talk of the future, O’Sullivan argues that the political structure of the United States is to remain unchanged in all ways, save for its geographic area. He conceives of freedom as a good to be enjoyed in an eternal present, and one that in the United States is present from the moment of the nation’s founding (Wilson 1974). An element of American sinlessness is the spiritual perfection of its political system, conceived in perfect harmony with the democratic principle. For O’Sullivan, it is by definition impossible for the United States to become more democratic, as its democratic standing is perfect from the very beginning. Although there existed flaws to be remedied, they did not, for O’Sullivan, transgress against the democratic principle and, thus, did not take on the character of sins. Because America had always embraced the democratic principle, it had no need of redemption. It is this spiritual perfection that gives Americans the right and duty to spread their system of government first across the continent and then the globe.

5. CONCLUSION

O’Sullivan’s confidence in the destiny of American flourishing and the nation’s sinlessness did not survive the crisis of the Civil War, during which he was a vehement supporter of the Confederacy. His pamphlet _Union, Disunion, and Reunion_, which called for a capitulation by the federal government to Confederate demands, was among the last of his writings to have any kind of popular readership (Sampson 2003). After the war, he found himself rejected as a traitor to the Union and then ignored. He returned to New York later in his life; his financial troubles never abated, and he vanished into obscurity. After the war, he rejected futurity for nostalgia, using séances to communicate with dead purchase. In 1851, however, O’Sullivan’s persistent (and decreasingly competent) efforts to trigger a rebellion by the plantation owners against the Spanish crown saw him tried by the Whiggish Filmore administration for violating the Neutrality Act (Merk 1970; Sampson 2003). For a full description of O’Sullivan’s often tragicomic misadventures in attempting to provoke rebellion in Cuba, see Sampson (2003), 213–18.

21. Interestingly, O’Sullivan turned to the Catholic sacrament of confirmation to restore the nation’s religious character, writing, “Perhaps, in the career of nations, such passages are, from time to time, necessary to spiritualize, to ennable and to purify the national life, too long stagnant in the tranquility of peace and of excessive material prosperity. We could not get it in foreign wars—geography and the pacific industrial character of our system combined to forbid it; perhaps civil war was necessary as the only form in which it was possible to us. Baptized at our birth in holy blood, perhaps we had reached the age at which a second sacramental confirmation was needed for our national salvation” (1862, 89).

22. The federal government issued a $25,000 reward for O’Sullivan immediately after Lincoln’s assassination (Widmer 1999).
dignitaries and former admirers. Ironically for a man who once identified aristocrats with the forces of Satan, he appeared in print for the last time in the *Royalist*, a magazine devoted to tracing aristocratic lineages, writing on the alleged aristocratic heritage of the O’Sullivan family (Widmer 1999). At the time of his death, only three of the New York dailies printed his obituary, each omitting any political involvement beyond his opposition to capital punishment (Sampson 2003). Having once been the voice of the radical Democrats, O’Sullivan at his death was less than an embarrassment; he was barely a memory.

Although the man himself may have been forgotten, understanding the political theology implicit in his work helps us to think clearly about the development of American civil religious self-conception throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. The belief that the United States has an exceptional moral standing in world history and an obligation to spread democracy and the experience of international politics through the lens of a conflict between good and evil remain prominent in contemporary American politics. So too do the belief in a providentially destined global democratic millennium and a faith-based understanding of the nature of democracy and the American polity, although the decline of overt racism has importantly altered ideas about who can hold that faith. Moreover, all of these ideas still exist in relationships that, while not identical to those in O’Sullivan’s theology, are recognizable from this examination of it.

For example, having explored the complex understanding of time and history in O’Sullivan’s writing opens a new perspective on the role of America in world history implicit in Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s description of Chinese resistance to democratization as a “fool’s errand,” an attempt to “stop history,” and in her belief that the United States has a special obligation to further democratic transition throughout the world (Goldberg 2011). Taken together with this commitment, her language here implies that the United States and its democratic allies have already achieved the democratic telos of world history, while the nondemocratic world lags behind them. Thus, while the democratic nations may have reforms to make, they need only become more of what they are. Nondemocratic countries must be transformed into something new. Clinton’s language of American exceptionalism retains—although modifies—the sacred time described by O’Sullivan. Within the United States it is circular, as the nation returns always to its founding principles. Beyond its borders, however, the sacred history of democratization is linear, with the world being converted to democracy. Like Clinton, O’Sullivan believes it to be the special obligation of the United States to advance this process. However, America’s position in history has shifted from O’Sullivan’s presentation thereof: for O’Sullivan, the democratic millennium was yet to
come, but for Clinton, it is already at hand, and all that remains is for this fact to be recognized, and it is America’s obligation to aid the world in coming to this realization.

The emphasis on America’s unique obligation to lead the world to democracy, by persuasion or by force, is pervasive in contemporary American political speech, and understanding O’Sullivan’s political theology is illustrative here as well. President Obama made the case that military intervention in the name of spreading democracy is core to the American identity and historical mission. In his March 28, 2011, remarks explaining the United States’ military intervention in Libya, Obama argued that “to brush aside America’s responsibility as a leader and, more profoundly, our responsibilities to our fellow human beings under such circumstances would have been a betrayal of who we are. Some nations may be able to turn a blind eye to atrocities in other countries. The United States of America is different” (2011). For Obama, the United States is exceptional in that it is by its very nature obliged to war against tyranny. If it were to do otherwise, it would not be America.

Indeed, the impulse to spread democratic government has in some ways become more all encompassing: while O’Sullivan believed there were racial and cultural groups who were simply incapable of democratic politics, the relative decline of overt racism in the United States has allowed the democratizing project to become truly global. Accordingly, all people of the world are understood to deserve and desire democracy. It is here that an understanding of O’Sullivan’s political theology is most informative, especially with reference to neoconservative thought regarding the 2003 American invasion of Iraq. Among many neoconservatives affiliated with this project, the expansionary mind-set that led O’Sullivan to equate being American with being democratic persisted. However, instead of demanding that Iraqis be educated in the democratic faith and thus become like Americans, as O’Sullivan conceived of the spread of democracy, the neoconservatives projected American attitudes onto the Iraqis. That is to say, they described the people of Iraq as being ready for democracy because they were already like the people of the United States, enthusiastically prepared to embrace and practice liberal democracy. This can be understood as a development of O’Sullivan’s argument that one had to become like an American in order to embrace the democratic principle. Americanness and capacity for self-government remain necessarily linked.

William Kristol, an advocate of the invasion, projected the relatively low political salience of sectarian differences in America onto the Iraqis when he told interviewer Terry Gross in 2003, “I think there’s been a certain amount of, frankly, Terry, a kind of pop sociology in America, that, you know, somehow the Shia can’t get along with the Sunni, or the Shia in Iraq just want to establish some kind of fundamentalist regime. There’s almost no evidence of
that at all” (Gross 2003). That same year, Paul Wolfowitz made a similar claim, saying, “the Iraqis are among the most educated people in the Arab world. They are by and large quite secular” (Block 2003). Self-interested Iraqis such as Ahmed Chalabi would do much to promote this view (Cole 2003; Walt 2012).

Instead of arguing that the Iraqis needed to become Americans, individuals like Kristol and Wolfowitz argued that they already were. Among other things, this blatantly ignored the high levels of political salience that sectarian differences had achieved in Iraq due to Saddam Hussein’s persecution of Iraqi Shiites and Iranian activity capitalizing on their discontent (Cole 2003). Projecting American attitudes onto Iraqis and disregarding their history, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld spoke with confidence of the Iraqi response to invading American forces, saying, “There is no question but that they would be welcomed. Go back to Afghanistan, the people were in the streets playing music, cheering, flying kites, and doing all the things that the Taliban and the Al-Qaeda would not let them do. Saddam Hussein has one of the most vicious regimes on the face of the earth. And the people know that” (Lehrer 2003). Already being essentially similar in their attitudes to the American people, how could they do otherwise? How could they have any response except to enthusiastically embrace the good news of liberal democracy and the Americans who brought it to them?

The belief in the self-evident value of democracy and goodness of the American liberators is consistent with O’Sullivan’s political theology, as is the conceptual linking of political liberation, ultimate morality, and the projection of American force present in the political speech of neoconservative members of the Bush administration, including the president himself. Six years after the invasion of Iraq, in his 2009 farewell address, President Bush reiterated his vision of the War on Terror as a cosmic battle between the forces of good and evil, saying that “if America does not lead the cause of freedom, that cause will not be led. As we address these challenges—and others we cannot foresee tonight—America must maintain our moral clarity. I have often spoken to you about good and evil. This has made some uncomfortable. But good and evil are present in this world, and between the two there can be no compromise” (2009). In these words, President Bush advances two arguments familiar from my examination of O’Sullivan’s political theology. First, the United States is a unique actor in world history, necessarily at the vanguard of the worldwide

23. Interestingly, Kristol here implicitly accuses skeptics of the democratization project in Iraq as being themselves racist or at least illegitimately ethnocentric in their thought.

24. On the problems facing the exportation of the Western category of the secular to non-Western societies, see Casanova (2011) and Taylor (2011).
democratization process. Second, this process is no mere historical development but a Manichaean struggle between democratic good and antidemocratic evil. Understanding O’Sullivan’s thought makes plain that these two beliefs are not two distinct concepts but are in fact systematically related.

This systematic relationship is reinforced elsewhere in Bush’s farewell address, when he says of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, “The battles waged by our troops are part of a broader struggle between two dramatically different systems. Under one, a small band of fanatics demands total obedience to an oppressive ideology, condemns women to subservience, and marks unbelievers for murder. The other system is based on the conviction that freedom is the universal gift of Almighty God and that liberty and justice light the path to peace. This is the belief that gave birth to our Nation. And in the long run, advancing this belief is the only practical way to protect our citizens” (2009). Here again, Bush’s words put forward the notion that that War on Terror is a struggle between the forces of good and evil. Here, though, he also describes the United States as being in the service of the will of God, who has ordained that his gift of democracy should spread to every corner of the earth. Moreover, this mission is not only undertaken in service of the nation’s providential mission but described as being key to American security interests. This series of conceptual linkages—arguing that the American interest is the universal human interest, which is in turn the will of God—is identical to that present in O’Sullivan’s political theology, which systematically links humanity’s providential telos and questions of ultimate morality to the national interests of the United States and its projection of force beyond its borders.25

In the same 1845 article in which he coined the phrase Manifest Destiny, O’Sullivan argued that the providential mission to spread democracy trumped legal niceties, as “were the respective arguments and cases of the two parties, as to all these points of history and law, reversed—had England all ours, and we nothing but hers—our claim to Oregon would still be best and strongest” (1845c). This reasoning is repeated exactly in the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq. As Don Van Natta reported for the New York Times (2006), the plan had always been to topple the government of Saddam Hussein, with or without a UN resolution authorizing it and regardless of whether unconventional weapons were discovered. A belief in America’s providential destiny to spread democracy across the globe and the idea that the United States is not bound

25. Bush’s deputy secretary of defense, Paul Wolfowitz, likewise linked American national security interests to the extermination of authoritarian evil when he described the Bush administration’s “Freedom Agenda” in terms of an existential conflict between good and evil, saying, “We learned in the last century that democracies cannot live peacefully and undisturbed in a world where evil people control whole nations and seek to expand their bloody rule” (2003; see also Boyer 2004).
by the same rules that apply to other nations should not be understood as distinct and separate articles of faith. Rather, these are elements of a coherent politico-religious system all but identical to that put forth by O’Sullivan in the nineteenth century. The themes promulgated by O’Sullivan, depicting the United States as a messianic nation with an exceptional ethical and religious status that exempts it from the norms that bind other nations, remain with us still. Looking through the lens of his thought, we can better understand one of the ways that Americans think about who they are, what they do, and why they do it. A knowledge of O’Sullivan’s political theology aids us in comprehending the events of our own time, helping us to think through the moral, political, and religious impulses that undergird American thinking on the role of the United States on the world stage.

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